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Female Mystics in Mediaeval Islam: The Quiet Legacy

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Abstract

Historians and analysts of current affairs alike are interested in the role that women have played in Islam, including the extent to which women were the agents and creators of Islamic mysticism. We still know surprisingly little about premodern learned women, particularly from the eastern Iranian world. This article describes one female mystic, Umm ʿAlī, who flourished in ninth-century Balkh and has so far eluded modern scholarship. A historiographical study of her provides insight into how the representations of mystical women changed over time. From the earlier sources, we learn that Umm ʿAlī applied creative and interesting strategies that provided her access to the highest sources of learning. Umm ʿAlī's case also allows for some tentative conclusions on the importance of pedigree, and the practice of strategic marriages that connect local power-holders with the *ʿulamāʾ*.

Keywords

mysticism, Islam, scholarship, eastern Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, mediaeval history, gender, women.

> *Zanān-i īn pākān chunīn būda-and, tā mashāyikh-i aʿẓām bi chi ḥadd būda bāshand!*
>
> If the wives of these pure [ones] were such, [just think] at what levels the great *shuyūkh* must have been![1]

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1) Shaykh al-Islām al-Wāʿiẓ and ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim al-Ḥusaynī, *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1350/1971): 227.

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Introduction

The archetypal female mystic of mediaeval Islam is, no doubt, the famous Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya al-Qaysiyya (d. 185/801), known simply as "Rābiʿa." Annemarie Schimmel pointed out that Rābiʿa had many successors and that they did not all resemble Rābiʿa.[2] But, despite wide current interest in the role of women in Islam, the story of public, mystical Muslim women remains largely focussed on Rābiʿa, and, in the accounts on her, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between fact and myth. Fragmentary records, scattered references, and ambiguous representations also confound attempts to form a coherent view of other female mystics. The goal of this article is to bring together evidence on one nearly contemporary mystic, Umm ʿAlī of Balkh, also known as the "one of high standing" *(mahd-i ʿaliyya).* It will be seen that Umm ʿAlī presents a very different profile of female mystic. A close reading of the primary sources highlights the fact that the narrative of her agency and impact changed over time. The transformation occurred at the hands of her biographers, who were bound by social conventions that restricted women's agency. From the earlier sources, we learn that Umm ʿAlī applied creative and interesting strategies that provided her access to the highest sources of learning.

The topic of female mysticism in mediaeval Islam is particularly important because religious scholarship was one area in which Muslim women assumed roles equal to those of men. This article might best be compared with the "women worthies" genre that Margaret Meriwether and Judith Tucker identified. The expression refers to the history of notable women "who have played a role that is visible (although often neglected in history writing) in public activities."[3] Given that we do not have much information on female scholars in pre-modern times, this approach that "adds women to history" remains valid. It raises new questions about the role of women as social and economic actors. There is not enough data on pre-modern female scholars for us to answer them comprehensively. Nonetheless, Umm ʿAlī's case allows us to reach some tentative conclusions about the importance of pedigree and the practice of strategic marriages that connect local power-holders with the *ʿulamāʾ*.

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2) Annemarie Schimmel, "Women in Mystical Islam," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5/2 (1982): 147, and Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*, trans. S.H. Ray (New York: Continuum, 1997).

3) Margaret Meriwether and Judith Tucker, *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

It should be added, as a caveat, that reconstructing the life experience of learned women such as Umm ʿAlī of Balkh from fragmentary texts with difficult historiographical traditions is a daunting task. The job is more difficult because early Islamic scholarship does not, by its very nature, lend itself to generalizations. Our clearly-defined modern view of Islamic scholars *(ʿulamāʾ)* and the legal schools *(madhāhib)* to which they may have belonged, for example, denies the plurality found in early mediaeval religious scholarship.[4] Our Balkhī source on Umm ʿAlī, the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, nowhere contains the word "Sufi."[5] Some of the biographies in this work are of public religious figures who have since been canonized as the prototypes of Sufism.[6] But, because our main source does not use it, we shall not call Umm ʿAlī a "Sufi" either and will use the generic term "mystic."

Before we turn to Umm ʿAlī's story, let us consider some of the relevant historiography and scholarship on the history of women scholars in the Islamic world. Most relevant for this article are quantitative studies; qualitative analyses of the visibility, image, and agency of female scholars; and the discussion of "misogynistic" attitudes held towards them.

Surveys, Numbers, Profiles

Since the early 1990s, modern scholars have questioned the traditional wisdom that Muslim women were "silent" and "oppressed" in pre-modern Islam. Relevant studies of the past two decades have revealed that women exercised far more power than was previously believed, including in the

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4) This plurality stems from the non-existence of formal schools *(madrasas)*, the regional differences in the evolution of *madhāhib*, and the non-alignment of individual scholars with a particular legal school or its master. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991): 199; Eyyup Kaya, "Continuity and Change in Islamic Law: The Concept of Madhhab and the Dimensions of Legal Disagreement in Ḥanafī Scholarship of the Tenth Century," in *The Islamic School of Law*, ed. Peri Bearman et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005): 26-40; Arezou Azad, *Sacred Landscape in Medieval Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming): 173-7.

5) Other hagiographical sources that date from around the time when the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* was written use the term "Sufi," usually with a reference to the Sufi mystical path, the *ṭarīqa*.

6) These include Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161/777-8), Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/809-10) and Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/857-8). See *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī, 93-118, 129-42, 165-77; Richard Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder des Sufitums* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 2:13-62.

area of Islamic scholarship.[7] Evidence for pre-modern female scholars in the Islamic world can be found in the biographical dictionaries that formed an important genre in Islamic historiography. Modern scholars have collated hundreds of women's biographies from these sources. The surveys do not always differentiate between categories of Islamic scholars—e.g., mystics, female traditionists (i.e., collectors of *ḥadīth),* and legal analysts—but total numbers of recorded female scholars remain relevant to us, because they allow us to place Umm ʿAlī in the context of the history of female Islamic scholarship.[8]

Ruth Roded found that several dozen mediaeval biographical compilations were filled with tens, hundreds, and even thousands of women scholars.[9] A more recent encyclopaedic collection of 8000 *muḥaddithat* is being carried out by Mohammad Akram Nadwi.[10] Irene Schneider focussed specifically on the twenty women scholars of the seventh to the thirteenth centuries CE discussed by the Syrian historian Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1347). She found that they played an active role in the educational system of their time.[11]

Disaggregating the numbers, Roded, and more recently, Nadwi, have shown that the majority of women are concentrated heavily around the first century of Islam. This is no doubt related to the unique position of the *ṣaḥabiyyāt*—women Companions who were the contemporaries of the Prophet—as precedents and role models for Muslims in general and for Muslim women in particular.[12] The numbers are lower but still significant

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7) Meriwether and Tucker, *A Social History*: 1-2.

8) Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, 40 vols. (forthcoming); summarized in Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007).

9) Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saʿd to Who's Who* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1994), and Roded, "Islamic Biographical Dictionaries: 9th to 10th Century," in *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures*, ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden: Brill, 2003-7).

10) Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt:* xv.

11) Irene Schneider, "Gelehrte Frauen des 5./11. bis 7./13.Jh.s nach dem biographischen Werk des Dahabi (st. 748/1347)," in *Philosophy and Arts in the Islamic World*, ed. Urbain Vermeulen and D. de Smet (Leuven: Peeters, 1998): 116-8, 121.

12) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*: 19-20. For a recent example, see Mervat Hatem, "A'isha Abdel Rahman: An Unlikely Heroine: A Post-Colonial Reading of her Life and Some of her Biographies of Women in the Prophetic Household," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7/2 (2011): 1-26.

in the eighth and ninth centuries CE but taper off dramatically thereafter.[13] Umm ʿAlī flourished during the ninth century CE, when women scholars were still well represented in the biographical dictionaries.

The accounts on female scholars have survived not only in biographical dictionaries but also in local histories. There are important references in Ibn ʿAsākīr's (d. 571/1176) *Taʾrīkh Dimashq* with 13,500 biographical entries, including more than 200 women (although these are mainly members of the Umayyad family rather than scholars).[14] Richard Bulliet examined the entries on women in the biographical dictionaries of Baghdad, Nishapur, and Gurgan. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's *Taʾrīkh Baghdād* (completed 463/1071) includes thirty women out of a total of 7,831 biographies. ʿAbd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī (d. 529/1132) wrote his *al-Siyāq li-Taʾrīkh Naysābūr* and included twenty-two women among his 1,699 biographies. Ḥamza al-Sahmī's (d. 426/1035) *Taʾrīkh Jurjān* gave the biographies of twelve women among his 1,194 biographies.[15] Bulliet spells out the important finding that these (relatively few) women were mentioned on account of their kinship ties to the compiler. Some were noble, others were involved in mysticism, and more were known for scholarship in *ḥadīth* or, rarely, in other disciplines.[16]

The local histories from further east—Bukhara, Samarqand, and Balkh—which are missing from Roded's survey, have a much smaller selection of women (and men). The *Faḍāʿil-i Balkh*, a text that forms the basis for much of this article's discussion, includes only the case of Umm ʿAlī and, to a far lesser degree, that of her husband's second wife, Ḥakīma Zāhida. The excerpt with the relevant account is translated from Persian into English in the appendix to this article. The Persian *Tārīkh-i Bukhāra,* which is more a history than a prosopography, does not mention any

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13) The numbers increase somewhat again in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries CE but decline gradually and consistently after the sixteenth century CE (for both female and male scholars). Nadwi, *Al-Muḥaddithāt*: 245-6, 271-2.

14) Ruth Roded, *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999): 77-8; Ibn ʿAsākīr, *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn Abī Saʿīd ʿUmar b. Gharāma al-ʿAmrawī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995-2000).

15) Richard Bulliet, "Women and the Urban Religious Elite in the Pre-Mongol Period," in *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*, ed. Guity Neshat and Lois Beck (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003): 68.

16) This categorization of female subjects of biographical compilations is taken from Malīḥa Raḥmat Allāh Rahmatallah, *The Women of Baghdad in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries as Revealed in the History of Baghdad of al-Hatib* (Baghdad: Times Press, 1963), cited in Bulliet, "Women and the Urban": 70-1.

Bukharan female scholar, much like the Arabic *Taʾrīkh Samarqand,* which follows the western Islamic prosopographical style of listings of *isnād*s (chains of transmitters), with limited information on the lived experiences of the scholars. The *Taʾrīkh Samarqand* profiles a single *muḥadditha* named Ṣūfiya bt. al-Shaykh al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Mustamlī Ismaʿīl b. Ibrāhīm b. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmrān al-Balkhī.[17]

Visibility, Image, and Agency of Women

The image of women as passive citizens confined to carrying out domestic chores and raising families was revised amongst Orientalists and Islamic historians in the 1970s and 1980s with studies of working women. Maya Shatzmiller studied mediaeval Muslim "working women," including rural labourers, hairdressers, peddlers, secretaries, prostitutes, and *ḥadīth* scholars. She concluded that "women were involved in economic life in medieval Islam to an important degree."[18] Leslie Pierce and Ruby Lal, who reinterpreted the Ottoman and Mughal *harem*s respectively, have shown the complex and contradictory character of domestic life, which was not limited to the home but extended well into the "public" domain.[19]

This complementary view of women as social and economic agents still, however, requires further refinement amongst Orientalists and Islamic historians. Julia Bray, in her study of men, women, and slaves in Abbasid society, laments that:

> [D]espite their [women's] much greater prominence in the biographical sources from around the thirteenth century onwards and in documentary sources from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, and the greater attention that both families and women of these later periods are now receiving, women—though no longer families—tend to be seen as objects rather than as agents, of social development.[20]

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17) Al-Nasafi, *al-Qand fi dhikr ʿulamāʾ Samarqand,* ed. Naẓar Muḥammad al-Fāryābī (Jidda: Maktabat al-Kawthar, 1991): 147.

18) Maya Shatzmiller, "Aspects of Women's Participation in the Economic Life of Later Medieval Islam: Occupations and Mentalities," *Arabica* 35 (1988): 58.

19) Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Ruby Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

20) Julia Bray, "Men, Women and Slaves in Abbasid Society," in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 130.

One might add the criticism that, even where women in the mediaeval Islamic world are considered, scholars have tended to focus on the western Islamic lands, providing far less evidence from the eastern Iranian world or Central Asia. Umm ʿAlī of Balkh contributes in a small way to rectifying this imbalance.

The image of the mystical woman, in particular, has dominated the discourse on learned Muslim women. And, within this discourse, the case of Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya has been adopted as the archetypal form. Rābiʿa was born into a poor home and sold into slavery. Her sanctity secured her freedom in a life of celibacy and prayer. She gathered around her many disciples, including one of Balkh's most famous early saints, Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 174/790-1) and the traditionist Sūfyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778), both of whom feature prominently in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*.[21] She received several offers of marriage but refused them all, choosing celibacy over marriage. She was famed for her teaching on mystic love *(maḥabba)* and fellowship with God *(uns)*.[22] As we shall see, Umm ʿAlī of Balkh has a very different background to that of Rābiʿa, which indicates that mystical women must have been diverse.

Another line of enquiry concerns the alleged taboo against Muslim women studying with men to whom they were not related or married. In his study of Mamluk learned women, Jonathan Berkey refers to the fourteenth-century Egyptian scholar Ibn al-Ḥajj, who held that it was not generally accepted that women sit across from men and get up and show the "private parts of their body."[23] This was seen as a threat to established sexual boundaries represented by the mixing of men and women in informal lessons in mosques or homes. Often, women were taught by other women. Huda Lutfi, however, emphasizes that there are discrepancies between the prescriptions that Ibn al-Ḥajj wants to uphold and women's agency in reality. This becomes obvious in the fact that Ibn al-Ḥajj criticizes what had become a reality in Cairene society—the free mingling of women and

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21) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 66, 93, 119, 129ff.

22) ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-Awliyāʾ*, 1: 59-73; Margaret Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics: The Life and Work of Rabia and Other Women Mystics in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001): 29; Margaret Smith, "Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya al-Ḳaysiyya", *EI2* (1995) 8: 355.

23) Jonathan Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education in the Mamluk Period," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 149.

men, as in mosques during public festivals.[24] We shall see that Umm ʿAlī also displayed a more open attitude towards her male colleagues and teachers.

The question of women's visibility and the law has been taken up by scholars such as Christopher Melchert, who surveyed mediaeval Islamic law on the question of whether women should be kept out of the mosque. He prefaces his article by saying, "It is commonly observed that women enjoyed greater freedom of movement in earlier Islamic law than later."[25] Matthieu Tillier found this public visibility to be true also of women at the Abbasid legal courts.[26] Our study of Umm ʿAlī fits within these historiographical debates that find mediaeval Islamic women to be visible and influential in society, albeit usually mediated through male connections—a husband, father, or some other male relative.

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24) Huda Lutfi, "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 115.

25) Christopher Melchert, "Whether to Keep Women out of the Mosque: A Survey of Medieval Islamic Law," in *Authority, Privacy and Public Order in Islam*, ed. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska and Andrzej Pikulski (Leuven: Peeters, 2006): 59.

26) Mathieu Tillier, "Women before the Qadi under the Abbasids," *Islamic Law and Society* 16/3-4 (2009): 301. Tillier caveated his finding with the social distinction between those who could leave their houses and came before the judge (unveiled), and those who could not. He found that high-ranking women avoided such public exposure. Other studies on women's visibility and the law include: Judith Tucker, "Muftīs and Matrimony: Islamic Law and Gender in Ottoman Syria and Palestine," *Islamic Law and Society* 1/3 (1994): 265-300, and Nicholas Awde, *Women in Islam: An Anthology from the Qurʾān and Ḥadīths* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000). Another set of studies does not deal with women scholars per se, but provides evidence for the visibility and public political role of high-society mediaeval women in the Islamic world. Nabia Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad: Mother and Wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1946); Maaike van Berkel focussed on women at the Abbasid court of the initially under-aged caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-32), in "The Young Caliph and His Wicked Advisors: Women and Power Politics under Caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295-320/908-932)," *Al-Masāq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 19/1 (2007), 3-15. Eric Hanne found similar trends amongst women in the Abbasid courts of the early eleventh to twelfth centuries CE, in "Women, Power, and the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Abbasid Court," *Hawwa: Journal of Women of the Middle East and Islamic World* 3/1 (2005), 80-110.

The Argument of "misogyny"

Some scholars have tried to explain the decline in female scholarship after the ninth century CE as the result of a misogynistic bias of the male biographical compilers. Roded suggests that the ninth-century "ʿAbbāsid legists" purposely removed or omitted references to women scholars.[27] Richard Bulliet has a counterargument: He takes the numbers of entries at face value and concludes that women actually lost importance in the scholarly circles from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries CE.[28] As we shall see, Umm ʿAlī did not provoke an overt misogyny amongst her male biographers, who would have called into question her moral character or professional skills. She appears in numerous sources over the centuries, but again, she is only one case from Balkh.

The mediaeval female scholar presents a dilemma often misunderstood by those who look at ancient models to find support for contemporary views. Some scholars of the early 1990s held that the "origins" of the repression of modern Muslim women lay in the mediaeval period. Julie Scott Meisami argues strongly against this judgement[29] posited by her colleagues, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Leila Ahmed, and Denise Spellberg.[30] Scott Meisami writes:

> Gender and gender roles are social constructs and subject to change over time, both in actuality and in textual representations. Arguments based on the assumption that gender is a constant in any given society, culture, or religion and that it is uniformly so treated by writers, are therefore untenable.[31]

Equally, Umm ʿAlī should not be taken as the prototype for any paucity of women scholars observed in today's eastern Iran or Central Asia, even though she presents only one case: we simply do not know the percentage

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27) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*: 45, 58-9.

28) Bulliet, "Women and the Urban Religious Elite": 75.

29) Julie Scott Meisami, "Writing Medieval Women: Representations and Misrepresentations," in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons*, ed. Julia Bray (London: Routledge, 2006): 66.

30) Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Denise Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of ʿA'isha bint Abi Bakri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

31) Scott Meisami, "Writing Medieval Women": 59-60.

of women scholars. Moreover, Umm ʿAlī's scholarly path and her actions were mediated by a literary tradition that evolved over time. It is to this literary tradition that we now turn.

The Sources on Umm ʿAlī of Balkh

There are half a dozen interesting textual references to Umm ʿAlī in several Persian and Arabic sources. We are, in general, dealing with a challenging and limited base of sources, when compared with the evidence base in other disciplines. This contrasts markedly with the wealth of sources that scholars of learned women in ancient Greece possess, for example.[32] It is with this source gap in mind that I deliberately adopt an in-depth view of the historiography on Umm ʿAlī to embrace the plurality and full range of possibility of her agency.

The main source of information on Umm ʿAlī's life is the third part of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh,* which profiles seventy *shuyūkh* (pl. of *shaykh,* i.e., members of the *ʿulamāʾ*) who flourished in Balkh between the seventh and twelfth centuries CE. From this underused prosopographical and historical source we can extract by far the most data on Umm ʿAlī's life. The original Arabic version of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* was written by the Shaykh al-Islām al-Wāʿiẓ al-Balkhī (fl. 610/1214), and his account survives only in a Persian rendition made by a certain ʿAbdallāh [b. Muḥammad] b. al-Qāsim al-Ḥusaynī (fl. 676/1278). We know of the author and translator only what the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* tells us, and we have no way of determining how closely the Persian rendition follows the original Arabic. We can say with some certainty that the Arabic author was a member of the *ʿulamāʾ*, as was probably the Persian translator.

The work survives in four manuscript copies only, none of which can be precisely dated.[33] The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* is largely hagiographical and anecdotal,

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32) Joan Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 2-3.

33) The earliest copy—deposited at the Bibliothèque nationale française as MS Persan 115—can be placed roughly in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries CE, based on its epigraphic style and paper quality. Edgar Blochet, *Catalogue des Manuscrits Persans* (Paris: Imprimérie Nationale, 1905), 1: 316-7; Francis Richard, *Catalogue des manuscrits persans. 1. Anciens fonds* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1989): 134. The text may well have undergone recension since the original was copied, but the biographies do not go beyond the late twelfth century CE, and there has been no attempt by later copyists to add more scholars to the group of seventy. The second-oldest manuscript came to light a decade ago

which might call into question its validity as a source for history, but scholars such as Jürgen Paul have argued that storytelling is a narrative technique that keeps the audience interested while giving them a taste of universal messages that are common to works of *adab* (educational and entertaining prose); factuality was not so much the issue.[34] We need to be careful when using the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* as a historical source, but, as the earliest surviving narrative from and on Balkh, it remains invaluable for our study.

The *Faḍāʾil-i* Balkh, in turn, cites at least three sources for the account on Umm ʿAlī (see translated excerpt in appendix): the *Risāla* by Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī; a work of *ṭabaqāt*, a biographical genre that classifies scholars according to "levels";[35] and "history books". Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) is the source for the account of a dinner that Umm ʿAlī's husband Aḥmad organized for a member of the *futuwwa*—the organizations of chivalry sometimes associated with Sufism but which, unlike the Sufi orders, tended to be more social than spiritual in orientation.[36] Qushayrī is the well-known Khorasani mystic and scholar of the Shāfiʿī legal school, and his *Risāla* (c. 438/1045) is an important early compendium of the principles and terminologies of Sufism.[37] The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* is a text that values the principles of piety and mysticism, and it is, therefore, not surprising that the author cites the *Risāla*. He was true to his

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and has been dated to the seventeenth century. ʿĀrif Nawshāhī, "Nuskha-yi naw-yāfta-yi Faḍāʾil-i Balkh," *Maʿārif* 19/2 (1381/2002): 61. In addition, two nineteenth-century manuscripts are deposited in St Petersburg, at the Department of Oriental Manuscripts, with the catalogue numbers C453-1 and C453-3. N.D. Miklukho-Maklai, *Opisanie tadzhikskikh i persidskikh rukopiseĭ Instituta* (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR: 1961), 2: 86-93. These St Petersburg manuscripts, together with the Paris manuscript, formed the basis for the 1350/1971 Tehran edition of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* by the Afghan scholar ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī, cited extensively in this article.

34) Jürgen Paul, "The Histories of Isfahan: Mafarrukhi's *Kitāb Maḥāsin Isfahan,*" *Iranian Studies* 33/1-2 (2000): 119, 126; and Jürgen Paul, "Hagiographische Texte als historische Quelle," *Saeculum* 41 (1990): 17-45; also Stefan Leder (ed.), *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998).

35) The biographical entries in *ṭabaqāt* works tend to be brief and usually involve a perfunctory listing of who transmitted from whom. The aim was to establish a proper chain of transmission *(isnād)* on a *ḥadīth* text which authenticated any given statement. Ibrahim Hafsi, "Recherches sur le genre '*ṭabaqāt*' dans la littérature arabe," *Arabica* 23 (1976-7): 228ff.

36) John Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005): 62.

37) Shaykh al-Islām al-Wāʿiẓ used it as a source also for the biography of Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/857-8). *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 169.

source: the original account of the dinner in the *Risāla* survives today and is recognizable from the account in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*.[38]

Sufi sources tend, in general, to provide more information on female spiritual figures than do other Islamic texts.[39] Qushayrī's *Risāla* has contemporary parallels and successors that the author of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* could have cited yet did not but which we will consider in this article. These include Sufi hagiographical and prosopographical compilations and *tadhkira* works, such as Abū Nuʿaym al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Iṣfahānī's *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyāʾ* (composed 422/1031), al-Hujwīrī's (d. 465-9/1072-7) *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, and Farīd al-Dīn Aṭṭār's (d. 617/1221 or earlier) *Kitāb Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*.[40]

The second source cited in the excerpt on Umm ʿAlī is a certain ʿAlī b. Faḍl on the wise sayings attributed to Umm ʿAlī (and her husband Aḥmad's second wife, Ḥakīma Zāhida). Perhaps this is ʿAlī b. al-Faḍl b. al-Ṭāhir al-Balkhī (d. 323/934-5?) whose *ṭabaqāt* is mentioned elsewhere in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* as a key source.[41] Women were by no means excluded from *ṭabaqāt,* as is demonstrated convincingly in Roded's inventory. A very early

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38) Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayrīya fī ʿilm al-taṣawwuf*, ed. Maʿrūf Zurayq and ʿAlī ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Balṭajī (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1990): 228; *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism: al-Risala al-Qushayriyya fī ʿilm al-taṣawwuf*, trans. Alexander Knysh (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2007): 238-9; see also Jawid Mojaddedi on Qushayrī's *Risāla*, in *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism: The Ṭabaqāt Genre from al-Sulamī to Jāmī* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001): 99-124. It should be noted that Qushayrī refers to these chivalrous men as ''*ayyār*' who were members of local urban militias in Muslim cities and towns. On the connection between the ʿ*ayyārān*, medieval Sufism and chivalry, see Deborah Tor, *Violent Order, Religious Warfare, Chivalry, and the ʿAyyār Phenomenon in the Medieval Islamic World* (Würzburg: Ergon in Komission, 2007): 229 ff.

39) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*: 92.

40) Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ wa-ṭabaqāt al-asfiyaʾ* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1932); ʿAlī b. ʿUthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, ed. Maḥmūd Duʿābidī (Tehran: Surūsh, 1383/2004-5); Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, *The Tadhkiratu 'l-Awliya (Memoirs of the Saints)*, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1905); ʿAbd al-Raḥman b. Aḥmad Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns min ḥaḍarāt al-quds*, ed. Maḥmūd ʿĀbidī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Iṭṭilāʿāt, 1370/1991). Abū Nuʿaym and ʿAṭṭār are, in fact, cited in other biographical entries of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*. See *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: xxiii-xxiv, 120, 167, 220.

41) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 10. ʿAlī b. al-Faḍl's *ṭabaqāt* is no longer extant, but we know that it was used widely, at least until the fifteenth century. It is referred to by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071) in the *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*, and by al-Sakhāwī four centuries later, in the *al-Ī lān bi-l-tawbīkh li-man damma ahl al-tawrīkh*. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Taʾrīkh Baghdād*, ed. Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1349/1931), 12: 47-8; al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ī lān bi-l-tawbīkh li-man dhamma ahl al-tawārīkh*, in Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968): 464 and n. 1.

source in the form of the Iraqī Ibn Saʿd's (d. 230/845) *ṭabaqāt*, for example, included more than 4000 women (amongst them 629 independent entries, the rest being embedded in other sections).[42] In the Khorasani *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya* by al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), from Nishapur, we find no mention of Umm ʿAlī,[43] but she appears in al-Sulamī's minor work, the *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt al-Ṣūfiyyāt*.[44]

A third set of sources in the excerpt on Umm ʿAlī is referred to as "the history books" *(kutub-i tawārīkh),* which the Shaykh al-Islām al-Wāʿiẓ used to describe Umm ʿAlī's ancestry.[45] The generic reference is repeated elsewhere in the work and reflects the author's primary focus on legal, scholarly, and Sufi works, his limited familiarity with historical texts, and a possible later redaction.[46]

Umm ʿAlī's Path to Scholarship

Study and Credentials

From the excerpt on Umm ʿAlī in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, we learn that she received an Islamic education of the highest level in her time. She studied with a certain Ṣāliḥ b. ʿAbdallāh and transmitted his book of *tafsīr* (Qurʾanic exegesis).[47] *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* editor ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī and Richard

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42) Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections*: 3. Ibn Saʿd's selection of Khorasani scholars is slim, however, and lists only men. See Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957-68), 7: 365-79.

43) Al-Sulamī, *al-Ṭabaqāṭ al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Johannes Pedersen (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960): 93-7. This is an abbreviated version of al-Sulamī's non-extant *Taʾrīkh al-ṣūfiyya*, and it is very likely that she was mentioned in the longer work.

44) Al-Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt al-Ṣūfiyyāt*, ed. and trans. Rkia Elaroui Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999): 168-9.

45) The Shaykh al-Islām perhaps refers here to the chronicles on Balkh that existed in his time but are lost to us. There was, for example, the *Manāqib Balkh* written by the geographer Abū Zayd Aḥmad b. Sahl al-Balkhī (d. 322/934), which the Shaykh al-Islām cites elsewhere in his work. See *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 54, 226.

46) The Shaykh al-Islām does not cite a single general history anywhere in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, not even al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *Taʾrīkh* or its Persian adaptation by Balʿamī (d. 363/974). Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, in 15 vols and 3 series (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1879-1901); Abū ʿAlī Balʿamī, *Taʾrīkh-nāma-yi Ṭabarī gardānīda-yi mansūb bi Balʿamī*, ed. Muḥammad Rawshan (Tehran: Bunyād-i Farhang-i Īrān, 1378/1999); *Chronique du Abou-Djafar-Mohamed-ben Djarir-ben-Yezid Tabari*, trans. Hermann Zotenberg (Paris: Oriental Translation Fund, 1867-74).

47) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226-7. See excerpt in appendix.

Gramlich have identified this teacher as Ṣāliḥ ʿAbdallāh Ṣāliḥ b. ʿAbdallāh b. Dhakwān al-Bāhilī al-Tirmidhī (probably d. 239/853-4), who also taught the Qurʾan to Umm ʿAlī's husband, Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh,[48] to whom we shall return shortly.

Umm ʿAlī later travelled to Mecca, where she performed the *ḥajj* pilgrimage and remained for seven years to study, until she mastered all the branches of Islamic knowledge *(ʿilm)* and was instructed in *ḥadīth*. None of the other sources describes the educational background that formed the basis for her scholarship. These are, of course, the credentials sought by male *ʿulamāʾ* as well. Travel was an important part of Islamic education until the sixth century of Islam, that is, before Muslim learning became more formalized through schools and *madrasa*s.[49]

Umm ʿAlī's studies should not strike us as unusual for women. Berkey explains that obtaining an education is well attested in the sources for mediaeval learned women. Amongst the 1075 women listed in al-Sakhawī's *al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ fī aʿyān al-qarn al-tāsiʿ* on leading figures of the fifteenth century, for example, 411 obtained such an education—either by memorizing the Qurʾan, studying with a particular scholar, or receiving *ijāza*s (licenses to transmit). Her transmitting a book—rather than a set of *ḥadīth*—is likewise not uncommon.[50]

The standards and expectations of Umm ʿAlī as a scholar were in no way less rigorous than those to which her male counterparts were held: she still needed to travel to Mecca for the pilgrimage, to study with a master for an extended period, and to obtain the credentials to transmit her teacher's work. The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* mentions without judgement her travels, in which she may have been unaccompanied by her husband.[51]

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48) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226, 219 and n. 12; Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 96 and n. 7. Sāliḥ b. ʿAbdallāh would also have been the name of her great-uncle (see below).

49) Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1889-90): 175-88.

50) Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education": 145-6; also Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*: 192.

51) We can assume—from the statement that, when she returned, he was already buried in Balkh—that she travelled without her husband for at least part of her time in Mecca. *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh,* ed. Ḥabībī: 226. We do not know whether Umm ʿAlī travelled with anyone else.

Marriage and Home

Nowhere have I found Umm ʿAlī's birth or death dates. The lack of dates is a common feature in mediaeval accounts on Muslim learned women in general. Fortunately, the biography of her husband Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* gives some information that allows us to home in on the second half of the ninth century. The clue is that, when Umm ʿAlī returned to Balkh from Mecca, her husband had already died. We know from the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* and other sources that Aḥmad died in 240/854-5, at the age of ninety-five. This sets the terminus post quem for Umm ʿAlī's death at 240/854-5. If she did survive to old age, she would probably have lived well into the second half of the ninth century CE.

The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* does not mention Umm ʿAlī's given name, but other sources do. Al-Hujwīrī tells us in his *Kashf al-maḥjūb* that Umm ʿAlī's name was Fāṭima.[52] Umm ʿAlī married well, as one might expect for a woman of her standing (see below), but she did not marry a wealthy noble, choosing instead one of Balkh's most beloved scholars and mystics, the *qāḍī* Abū Ḥāmid Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh (d. 240/854-5), who receives ample treatment in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*[53] and other hagiographical sources and is known as an example of the *futuwwa* (spiritual chivalry).[54] Gramlich does not see him as a proponent of the *malāmatiyya* –the early Islamic mystical tradition that originated in Khorasan and based itself on the tenet that all outward appearance of piety or religiosity is ostentation– but, as Hamid Algar explains, the concepts of *futuwwa* and the *malāma* overlap during this period.[55] As a *fatā* (a young male exponent of *futuwwa*), Aḥmad is credited with exhibiting much generosity, which left him in a constant state of debt.[56] He expounded on the mystical concepts of seeking refuge

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52) Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 183.

53) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 219-30.

54) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 95-112; Mina Hafizi, trans. Farzin Negahban, "Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh (Khiḍrūya) al-Balkhī," in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, 3: 261-4.

55) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 95; Hamid Algar, "Malāmatiyya. 2. In Iran and the Eastern Lands," *EI2*, 6: 224-5.

56) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 102-5. Here, Gramlich also cites the verses by the poet Rūmī on Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh's constant debt on account of his generosity (p. 104), verses 373-444, entitled "How by divine inspiration Shaykh Aḥmad, son of Khiḍrawayh, bought *ḥalwā* (sweetmeats) for his creditors." See Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, *Mathnawī wa-maʿnawī*, ed. Reynold Nicholson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1925-40), 4/1: 268; 4/2: 241-5, repr. (Tehran: Nashr-i Būta, 2002), 1: 350-5.

in God alone, outlined a ten-step process to attain the Sufi *ṭarīqa*, and pondered the battle with the soul *(nafs)*. He is said to have met and studied with major *shuyūkh*, such as Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 161/777-8), Ḥātim al-Aṣamm (d. 237/857-8), and Abū Ḥafṣ b. Ḥaddād (d. c. 265/878-9) in Nishapur. Much is also written about his stay with Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 261/874-5?).[57] Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh had many students, including some better-known authorities.[58] According to ʿAbdallāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī (d. 481/1089), who mentions Umm ʿAlī only in passing, Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh also performed the *ḥajj* to Mecca, besides visiting the above-mentioned masters.[59]

While one might assume that Shaykh Aḥmad had chosen his betrothed, al-Hujwīrī's account and those of his successors tell us that it was quite the opposite: Umm ʿAlī wooed Aḥmad. Umm ʿAlī's decision to marry apparently came after a change of heart on the matter. We are not told what made her change her mind, but perhaps the message here is to stress the importance of marriage even for pious, mystical women. Al-Hujwīrī states that Umm ʿAlī had to ask Aḥmad more than once before he complied, and then only after she had cunningly appealed to his spiritual conscience. Al-Hujwīrī says:

> Chūn way-rā irādat-i tawba padīdār āmad, bi Aḥmad kas firistād, ki: "Ma-rā az pidar bikhwāh." Way ijābat nakard. Kas firistād, ki: "Yā Aḥmad, man tū-rā mard-i ān napindāshtam ki rāh-i ḥaqq nazanī. Rāh-bar bāsh na rāh-bur." Aḥmad kas firistād, wa way-rā as pidar bikhwāst.[60]
>
> When she changed her mind, she sent someone [with a message] to Aḥmad: "Ask my father for my hand." He did not respond. She sent someone [again with a message]: "Oh Aḥmad, I did not think you a man who would not follow the path of truth. Be a guide of the road; do not put obstacles on it." Aḥmad sent someone [with a message] to ask her father for her hand.

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57) Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 95-8; Hafizi, "Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh": 262. Both cite, in particular, the account by al-Sahlagī. See al-Sahlagī, "al-Nūr min kalimāt Abī (Yazīd) Ṭayfūr," in ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Shaṭaḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Matbūʿāt, 1976). See also *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Habībī: 169, 219.

58) For details, see Gramlich, *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 98-9.

59) Hafizi, "Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh": 262; ʿAbdallāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Sarwar Mawlāʾī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Tūs, 1362/1983): 98.

60) ʿAlī b. ʿUthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, ed. Maḥmūd Duʿābidī (Tehran: 1383/2004-5), 183.

In Aṭṭār's *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*, Shaykh Aḥmad's biographical entry contains a discussion of his wife Fāṭima as a miracle-working mystic and "an accomplished master of the Sufi path" *(andar ṭarīqat, āyat-ī būd).*[61] From here on, Aṭṭār's account closely resembles that of al-Hujwīrī. The latter recounts her wooing of Aḥmad thus:

> Tawbat kard wa bar Aḥmad kas firistād, ki: "Ma-rā az pidar bikhwāh." Aḥmad ijābat nakard. Dīgar bār kas firistād, ki: "Ay Aḥmad, man tu-rā mardāna-tar az īn dānistam. Rāh-bar bāsh, na rāh-bur." Aḥmad kas firistād wa az pidar bikhwāst.[62]
>
> She changed her mind, and sent someone to Aḥmad [with the message:] "Ask my father for my hand." Aḥmad did not respond. Once more, she sent someone [with the message:] "Oh Aḥmad, I thought you were more manly than this. Be a guide of the road; do not put obstacles on it." Aḥmad sent [a messenger] and asked her father for her hand.

Al-Hujwīrī, too, identified Umm ʿAlī as the daughter of a high official, although he calls her "daughter of the *amīr* of Balkh."[63] The imprecision about Fāṭima's lineage—she was the granddaughter of Balkh's governor, as will be seen shortly—is repeated in later sources of the same genre. It contrasts with the persistence of the image of Umm ʿAlī as astute and "manly." After all, convention would have it that the man proposes to his prospective wife, and not vice versa.[64]

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61) ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*: 288.

62) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 183.

63) Ibid.

64) The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* does not make specific mention of Umm ʿAlī as being "manly." As an aside, we do find this metaphor in its account of another ninth-century woman, the wife *(khātūn)* of the Banījūrid ruler of Balkh, Dāwūd b. ʿAbbās b. Hāshim (r. 233-56/848-70). He is said to have been preoccupied for twenty years with building his palace Nawshād, during which time the *khātūn* performed the ruler's gubernatorial functions. The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* gives a rare example of just, generous, and dignified rule by the *khātūn*. She embarrassed the (unnamed) caliph in Baghdad, who was exacting exorbitant amounts of land tax *(kharāj)* from the people of Balkh. The reference seems to be to the caliphal policy of farming out state revenues, with local governors as tax-collectors to make up for the loss of provincial revenues and pay for their inflated bureaucracy—an exploitative practice the *khātūn* was clearly not willing to support. We are told that, through the caliphal tax collector *(ʿāmil-i dār al-khilāfa),* the *khātūn* at Balkh sent a personal garment that was studded with jewels and gold wefts as a gift. The caliph rejected it, feeling ashamed, and returned the gift to the *khātūn*, saying, "This lady has taught us gentlemanliness *(jawān-mardī)*." *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 21. The anecdote is repeated, with minor variations, in *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 40.

Social Class and Family Relations

The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* is a rich source for details on Umm ʿAlī's family background and social class, the like of which I have not found elsewhere. By tracing the family links between Umm ʿAlī and other *shuyūkh* of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, we can glean that Umm ʿAlī had considerable financial means and was descended from an important local family. Umm ʿAlī's maternal grandfather was one of the early Abbasid governors of Balkh, al-Ḥasan b. Ḥumrān (fl. 142/759-60). The name of this early *wālī* (governor) of Balkh is attested also in *fals* coins.[65] We are given her mother's name (Muʾmina) and burial place, which emphasizes the importance of Umm ʿAlī's semi matrilineal lineage, that is, one in which the mother is mentioned, with her patrilineal genealogy.[66]

The picture of Umm ʿAlī's family comes into sharper focus when we trace the family links mentioned in at least five more biographies in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, all of which lead back to her grandfather, al-Ḥasan b. Ḥumrān. In fact, a genealogy emerges that is situated in the highest echelons of Balkhī society, both scholarly and secular. Thus, in addition to her maternal grandfather al-Ḥasan b. Ḥumrān, we learn about the latter's brother (Umm ʿAlī's great-uncle), Mutawakkil b. Ḥumrān (d. 142/759-60). He was a successor *(ṭābiʿ)* to a Companion of the Prophet. Mutawakkil was also Balkh's first *qāḍī* and is profiled as the ninth *shaykh* in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*'s seventy biographies.[67] We are told that he was a staunch supporter of Umayyad rule, until its bitter end, and distinguished himself as a proponent of *irjāʾ*.[68] Men like Mutawakkil were the reason that one of Balkh's epithets was "Murjiʾābād."[69]

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65) Florian Schwarz, *Balḫ und die Landschaften am oberen Oxus XIVc Ḫurāsān III* (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 2002): 68-9 (plates). These are nos. 475-6, dated 142/759-60.

66) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226-7.

67) *Ibid.*: 85-9.

68) *Ibid.*: 82-6. The politico-religious movement of the Murjiʾa in eastern Khorasan and Transoxania had as its most essential element the exclusion of works from faith, that is, the actual performance of the ritual and legal obligations of Islam. Its proponents struggled for the equality of new local converts and their exemption from the payment of the *jizya* (poll tax) which the Umayyad administration continued to impose on them. See Wilferd Madelung, "The early Murjiʾa in Khorasan and Transoxania and the spread of Ḥanafism," *Der Islam* 59 (1982): 33.

69) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī, 28; Berndt Radtke, "Theologen und Mystiker in Ḫurāsān und Transoxanien," *ZDMG* 136 (1986): 539.

We also read that the governor had a second brother (i.e., a second great-uncle of Umm ʿAlī's), called ʿAbdallāh. His line accounts for four more of Balkh's seventy saints: Balkh's thirty-sixth *shaykh,* Muḥammad al-Fuḍayl (d. 261/874-5), is his great-grandson, while Balkh's fourteenth *shaykh*, the *qāḍī* Abū Muṭīʿ al-Balkhī (d. 204/819-20), married his great-grandaughter (and aunt of the said Muḥammad al-Fuḍayl). The son of Abū Muṭīʿ al-Balkhī is Balkh's thirty-first *shaykh*, called Muḥammad b. Abī Mutīʿ (d. 244/858-9). Moreover, the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*'s twentieth *shaykh,* Qāsim al-Zurayq (d. 201/820-1), married into the family through one of Abū Muṭīʿ's daughters.[70] We can now construct a family tree, which I call, for convenience, the "House of Ḥumrān."

Mapping the genealogy of the "House of Ḥumrān" makes a convincing case that scholarship and political power often went hand in hand within the same extended family. This house alone produced six of Balkh's seventy scholars profiled in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, in addition to Umm ʿAlī. Thus, family ties and elite connections in the formation of the mediaeval scholarly community seem to have been equally important for men and women. I have argued elsewhere that a significant number—but not all—of Balkh's *shuyūkh* were independently wealthy and connected to social and political circles of power.[71] The same seems to have been true of women scholars. As we have seen, Umm ʿAlī had major family connections through maternal blood relations. Richard Bulliet also found that al-Fārisī's women scholars were mentioned in his eleventh-century history of Nishapur, on account of their family and marriage ties.[72]

The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* emphasizes not only Umm ʿAlī's family pedigree but also her wealth. She spent a considerable amount of her own money to finance her pilgrimage to Mecca.[73] The *ḥajj* was an expensive undertaking for an eastern Khorasani: the distance between faraway Balkh and Mecca was 3150 kilometres, as the crow flies. Expenses included transport, food, and lodging costs for the outbound and inbound journeys, which took months. It appears she also financed her seven-year sojourn in Mecca herself. She obtained seventy-nine thousand dirhams from the sale of her estates and other possessions, and this would easily have covered all her

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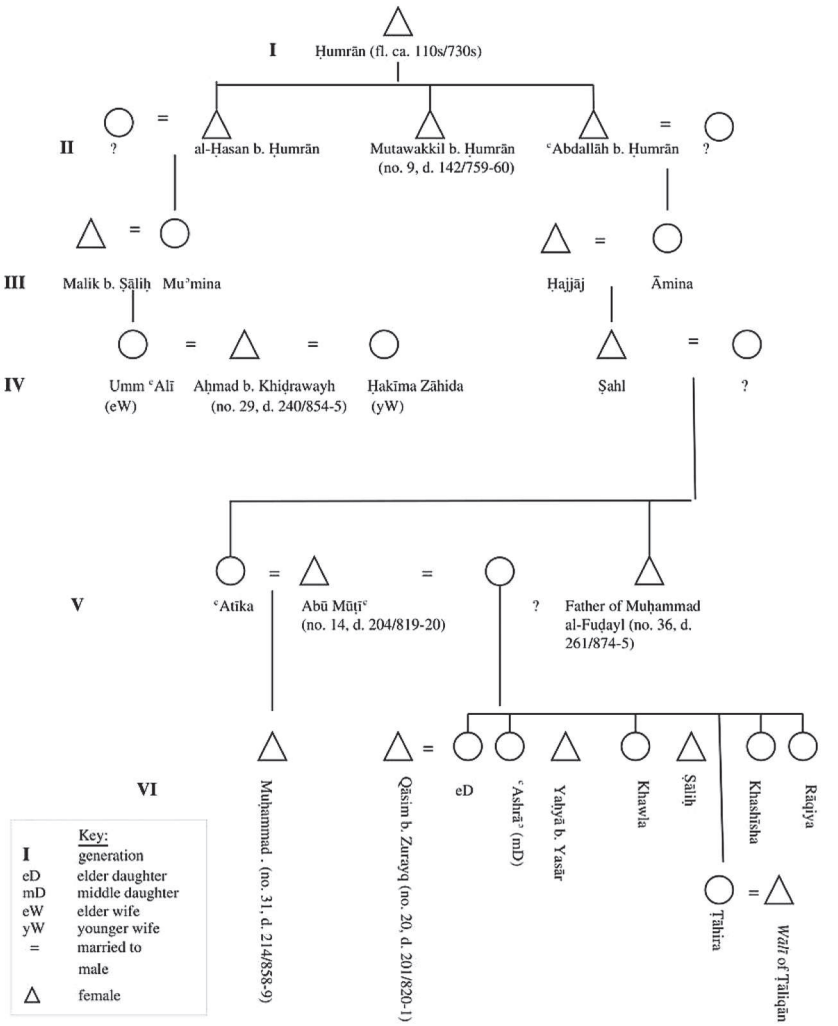
70) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 124-5, 177, 225-6, 240.
71) Azad, *Sacred Landscape*.
72) Bulliet, "Women and the Urban Religious Elite": 74.
73) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226-7.

The House of Ḥumrān (reconstructed from accounts in the *Faḍā'il-i Balkh):*



costs. It seems reasonable to assume that her wealth came from her grandfather's days as the governor of Balkh, for he would probably have been a major landowner.

We do not know whether, during her sojourn in Mecca, Umm ʿAlī disbursed some of her great wealth to charity, a practice ascribed to other ninth-century women during their pilgrimages.[74] Charity is a common

74) Marina Tolmacheva, "Female Piety and Patronage in the Medieval *'Ḥajj',*" in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Gavin R.G. Hambly (London: Macmillan, 1998): 161-6.

trope in later accounts of Sufis and other mystical religious figures and scholars. Jāmī, in his account of Umm ʿAlī, says, "She was of noble descent and had many possessions. She donated everything to the poor" *(Way az awlād-i akābir būd wa māl-i bisyār dāsht. Hama-rā bar fuqarā nafaqa kard)*.[75]

The channels through which female scholarship was acquired thus have a pragmatic element. The hosting and training of scholars and the patronage of shrines dedicated to them was expensive. In the ninth century CE it was the noble families, such as the House of Ḥumrān that had the financial resources, the know-how, and the important link with the early Abbasid past. The House of Ḥumrān is the only important family we can reconstruct from the biographies of the *shuyūkh* of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*. The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* ends its own historical account of Balkh in Part One, which precedes the biographies—Part Two is a brief geographical overview—with that of the Samanids. Their ascent in Bukhara and that of the Banījūrids in Balkh seem to coincide with the end of the prominence of this family.[76]

Umm ʿAlī's Actions and Attributes

Social Etiquette in Religious Society

One anecdote related in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* excerpt concerning Umm ʿAlī (see appendix) emphasizes Umm ʿAlī's awareness of social etiquette when advising her husband on how to organize a dinner for a member of the *futuwwa*. The author portrays Umm ʿAlī as the one with the "insider knowledge" on how to host such *fatā* men. Her husband, on the other hand, is depicted as lacking such knowledge (thus, we read in *FB*'s excerpt: "Oh Aḥmad! Can't you do that, and don't you know how one ought to invite these people of humanity and [fol. 135b][77] chivalry *(murūwat wa-futuwwat)?*"). We are thus left with the sense that Umm ʿAlī was worldly and "in the know," while Aḥmad appears to have lacked confidence and sociability.

The anecdote on the dinner is recounted in several Sufi hagiographical works, with some variations. Al-Hujwīrī identified the chivalrous guest as

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75) Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*: 620-1.

76) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 20-1, 42.

77) Folio numbers relate to the folios of the Persan 115 manuscript of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh,* deposited in Paris.

the mystic Yaḥyā b. Muʿādh al-Rāẓī (d. 258/872).[78] He explains that Shaykh Aḥmad consulted his wife on the dinner party in this way:

> "Daʿwat-i Yaḥyā-rā chi bāyad?" Guft: "Chandīn sar gāw wa gūsfand wa hawāyij wa tawābil wa chandīn shamʿ wa ʿaṭr. Wa bā īn hama nīz bīst sar khar bibāyad kusht." Aḥmad guft: "Kushtan-i kharān chi maʿnī dārad?" Guft: "Chūn karīmī bi khāna-yi karīmī mihmān bāshad, nabāyad ki sagān-i maḥallat-rā az ān khayr bāshad?[79]
>
> "How do I make the invitation to Yahya?" She said: "Some cows and sheep, carrots and seasoning, and some candles and perfume. And on top of all this, twenty asses must be killed." Aḥmad said: "What is the meaning of the killing of asses?" She said: "When a great man comes to the house of another great man, should the dogs of the quarter not benefit from it?

The implication in *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* that Umm ʿAlī was questioning Aḥmad's competence is absent from the *Kashf al-maḥjūb*. It appears that al-Hujwīrī's account is less concerned with the possibly unbalanced relationship between Aḥmad and Umm ʿAlī but keen on passing on her experiences of hosting proper dinners and the importance and act of generosity in general. It could be that the killing of the asses is a secondary element in the story. It certainly sounds like a component added to the main story, which concerns the treatment of the *futuwwa*. The secondary element is inserted to show that Umm ʿAlī was so sensitive to the needs of God's creatures that she considered the needs even of the unclean dogs. The charity may, however, have gone too far: why slaughter useful asses to feed ravening dogs?

Living out the Sufi Experience

The second anecdote in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*'s excerpt on Umm ʿAlī recounts her receiving the news that her husband had died and, shortly thereafter, learning that Aḥmad had merely fainted and was actually in good health. Umm ʿAlī is depicted as the apotheosis of composure and patience, which are important virtues for Sufis. Her unruffled stance throughout this series of events is contrasted with the agitated reactions of the co-wife, Ḥakīma

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78) Incidentally, this mystic appears in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* too, but as the author of a poem on Balkh (*Faḍāʾil-i Balkh,* ed. Ḥabībī: 55 and n. 3). An interpretation is provided in my article, "The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* and its place in Islamic historiography," *IRAN* 50 (forthcoming). For a biography of al-Rāzī, see Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*: 298-312.

79) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 184.

Zāhida. The author concludes that it is clear from this account that everyone reaches his or her particular "station" *(maqām)* and "moment" *(waqt)* in life. The implication appears to be that Umm ʿAlī had reached higher levels in both *maqām* and *waqt*.

The concepts of *maqām* and *waqt* are important in Sufism. The Sufi *maqām* is the dimension of spiritual experience generally characterized as having a certain duration and resulting, to some extent, from individual striving. The Sufi *waqt* is a dimension of mystical experience considered a timeless instant in which one is aware most acutely of one's spiritual state.[80] Umm ʿAlī, who is also called the one who is "of a high standing" *(mahd-i ʿaliyya),* had reached these spiritual heights. Umm ʿAlī is, for Shaykh al-Islām al-Wāʾiẓ, an exemplary mystic.

Al-Hujwīrī also emphasizes Umm ʿAlī's spiritual qualities, stating explicitly that she was "on the *ṭarīqa",* the Sufi path upon which all mystics embarked: "Fāṭima, his [Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh's] wife, had a noble standing in the Sufi path" *(Wa Fāṭima, ki ʿiyāl-i way būd, andar ṭarīqat shaʾnī ʿaẓīm dāsht)*.[81]

Advanced Learning and Exchange with Sufi Masters

According to al-Hujwīrī, Umm ʿAlī furthered her scholarly training by attending lessons with one of the most celebrated Islamic mystics of her time, Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 261/874 or 264/877-8).[82] Al-Hujwīrī's account of what she did when she arrived to study with Abū Yazīd is as follows:

> Chūn pīsh-i Bāyazīd āmad, burqaʿ az rūy bar-dāsht, wa bā way sukhan-i gustākh mī-guft. Aḥmad az ān mutaʿajjib shud wa ghayrat bar dilash mustawlī gasht. Guft: "Yā Fāṭima, ān chi gustākhī būdat bā Bāyazīd?" Guft: "Az āncha tū maḥram-i tabīʿat-i manī, wa way maḥram-i ṭarīqat-i man. Az tū bi hawā rasam, wa az way bi khudā. Wa dalīl bar īn, ān ki way az ṣuḥbat-i man bī-nīyāz ast, wa tū bi man muḥtāj."[83]
>
> When she came to Bāyazīd [Abū Yazīd], she removed her veil from her face and spoke with him boldly. Aḥmad was surprised by this, and jealousy seized his heart. He said,

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80) *Al-Qushayrī's Epistle on Sufism*: 75-8; Renard, *Historical Dictionary*: 159, 228.

81) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 183.

82) Hellmut Ritter, "Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) Ṭayfūr b. ʿ Īsā b. Surūs̲hān al-Biṣṭāmī," *EI2*, 1: 162-3.

83) al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 183-4.

> "Oh Fāṭima, why this boldness with Bāyazīd?" She said, "As much as you are my natural partner, he is my spiritual partner. Through you I reach love, and through him I reach God. This is because he does not need my company, while you need me."

Al-Hujwīrī tells us that the relationship between Umm ʿAlī and Abū Yazīd was not to last. One day, the great mystic commented on her hands and the henna painted on them. The utterance of such observations on a part of her body was a step too far for her, and Umm ʿAlī declared that it had rendered their companionship unlawful *(ḥarām)*.

It seems that Aṭṭār picked up this account from al-Hujwīrī, as his description of Umm ʿAlī's relationship with Abū Yazīd is almost identical:

> Chūn pīsh-i Bāyazīd andar āmadand Fāṭima niqāb az rūy bar-dāsht, wa bā Abū Yazīd sukhan mī-guft. Aḥmad az ān mutaghayyir shud, wa ghayratī bar dilash mustawlī shud. Guft: "Ay Fātima, īn chi gustākhī būd ki-bā Bāyazīd kardī?" Fāṭima guft: "Az ān-ki tu maḥram-i ṭabīʿat-i manī, wa Bāyazīd maḥram-i ṭarīqat-i man, az tū bi-hawā birasām wa az way bi-khudāy rasam. Wa dalīl-i sukhan īn-ast, ki ū az ṣuḥbat-i man bī-niyāz ast, wa tu bi-man muḥtājī."[84]
>
> When they arrived at Bāyazīd's, Fāṭima removed her veil from her face, and spoke with Abū Yazīd. Aḥmad became angry at this, and jealousy seized his heart. He said, "Oh Fāṭima, why this boldness with Bāyazīd?" Fāṭima said, "As much as you are my natural partner, Bāyazīd is my spiritual partner. Through you I reach love, and through him I reach God. This is because he does not need my company, while you need me."

How are we to explain Umm ʿAlī's unveiling in front of her teacher and scholarly companion Abū Yazīd? This is very different from what we learn from Mamluk accounts, that women who studied with men sat behind a screen so they could not be seen. They also studied alongside men, at times in full view and in public spaces.[85] The informal setting, of course, lent itself well to administering the teaching of women whose movements were more restricted than those of men. Even where men and women did seem to interact in full view of each other, the unveiling of a woman's face strikes

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84) ʿAṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyāʾ*: 288-9.

85) Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education": 149. From the biographies of Balkh's scholars in the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* we know that teachings tended to be held in groups *(majālis)* in scholars' homes or in the mosque, even after the establishment of the first *madrasa*s, in the eleventh century. Shaykh al-Islām al-Wāʿiẓ even omits to mention that one of the Saljūq Niẓāmiyyas, the *madrasa*s founded by the great Saljūq vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), was established in Balkh (in 471/1078-9). Perhaps he did not approve of this kind of centralization of education, or maybe the informal setting continued to dominate in Balkh. See Azad, *Sacred Landscape*.

one as unusual. Is it possible that Umm ʿAlī unveiled herself in order to assume the role of a male scholar?

Umm ʿAlī's reverse gendering finds its echo in a statement by al-Hujwīrī, who cites Abū Yazīd as saying this about Umm ʿAlī: "Whoever wishes to see a man disguised in women's clothes, let him look at Fāṭima!"[86] Alyssa Gabbay, in her study of Raziya, a noblewoman of the Delhi Sultanate, tried to make sense of her cross-dressing and identification as a man. Gabbay understood that Raziya had "exploited a metaphorical space in which elite daughters could exercise greater agency within a society that normally severely restricted their actions."[87] I find this a plausible explanation also for Umm ʿAlī's reverse genderization.

But perhaps Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣfahānī saw precisely this part of the account on Umm ʿAlī as problematic and adjusted the narrative somewhat. His (Arabic) account of Shaykh "Aḥmad b. Khiḍr" begins with Umm ʿAlī, who was "a daughter of notables" *(min banāt al-kibār)*:

> [Umm ʿAlī] excused *(ḥallalat)* her husband of paying [the later instalments of?] her bride-price *(ṣadaq),*[88] on the condition that he marry her *(an yuzawwijahā)* to Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī. He took her to Abū Yazīd. She came before him and sat down in front of him, her face unveiled. Aḥmad expressed amazement and said to her, "I see that you are unveiled before Abū Yazīd." She replied, "Because whenever I look at him I lose the fortune of my soul, and whenever I look at you I return to the fortunes of my soul." But when he left, he [Aḥmad] said to Abū Yazīd, "Give me some advice." He said, "Learn chivalry *(futuwwa)* from your wife."[89]

It is interesting that Abū Nuʿaym also refers to Umm ʿAlī's manly characteristics *(futuwwa).* His account diverges from the Persian ones in one main detail: Umm ʿAlī was *married* by her husband Aḥmad to Abū Yazīd. Presumably this would have been preceded by a divorce. Whether this actually happened we cannot know, but it is interesting that Abū Nuʿaym felt it necessary to mention such a marriage, which may have been carried out in name only, in order to enable Umm ʿAlī to study under this man. Oddly, Abū Nuʿaym does not give his source for the account.

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86) Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb*: 184; *The Kashf al-Maḥjúb:* The *Oldest Persian Treatise on Ṣúfiism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1911): 120.

87) Alyssa Gabbay, "In Reality a Man: Sultan Iltutmish, His Daughter, Raziya, and Gender," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 4 (2011): 46, 51-8.

88) Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 53ff.

89) Al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, 10: 42.

The idea of a nominal marriage is reminiscent of the Baghdādī al-Masʿūdī's (d. 345/956) account of a marriage carried out on the orders of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd between his friend the Barmakid Jaʿfar and his sister ʿAbbāsa. This segment of al-Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab* is analyzed in detail by Julie Scott Meisami in her article on love and the fall of the Barmakids.[90] The caliph wanted to enjoy the company of Jaʿfar and ʿAbbāsa together. Al-Masʿūdī stresses that the marriage was one in name only, having Hārūn al-Rashīd say to Jaʿfar, "which will allow you to spend evenings with her, to look upon her, and to associate with her in gatherings in which I am with you, but no more than that." The marriage between ʿAbbāsa and Jaʿfar, however, was consummated against the caliph's wishes, and Hārūn al-Rashīd quarrelled with Jaʿfar. Of course, there is a second element in our story of Umm ʿAlī, which is that she was already married and had to divorce, perhaps temporarily, in order to pursue her educational goals. Jane Khatib-Chahidi discusses how certain kinds of "fictive marriages" are still practiced by devout women in Shiʿi Iran as a way for enabling women to interact with men in a non-sexual manner. Seen in this light, the meaning of the account on Umm ʿAlī may be that she was so devout that she even subjected herself to a nominal marriage before agreeing to study with Abū Yazīd.[91] The purpose of the account is thus to emphasize her piety.

Another part of Abū Nuʿaym's characterization that stands out is the description of Umm ʿAlī as "chivalrous" *(futuwwa).* This seems to echo al-Hujwīrī's earlier description of her as "a woman dressed in man's clothes." It is also reminiscent of the anecdote on Umm ʿAlī's coaching of Aḥmad on how to host a member of the *futuwwa*, as well as the account that, when Aḥmad brought her to Abū Yazīd, Umm ʿAlī did not behave like a normal

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90) Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, ed. and trans. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille, rev. and corr. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Publications de l'Université Libanaise, 1971-9): 1053-8 (§§ 2588-2601); Julie Scott Meisami, "Masʿūdī on Love and the Fall of the Barmakids," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1989): 258-9.

91) Jane Khatib-Chahidi explains that the validity of marriage (which is a civil contract under Islamic law) does not depend upon consummation of the marriage. She adds that devout Muslims make good use of temporary marriages (Ar. *mutʿa*, Pers. *sīgha*) "in its strictly nominal form" to facilitate the sharing of space with a man inside and outside the home in a legal manner. Jane Khatib-Chahidi, "Sexual Prohibitions, Shared Space and 'Fictive' Marriages in Shi'ite Iran," *Women and Space,* in Shirley Ardener, ed. (Oxford: Berg, 1993): 125-6.

prospective bride, who would have lowered her veil. The metaphor of *futuwwa* should not be read as referring to her gender; it refers non-technically to the quality of young men and, in Sufi terminology, especially to a reckless lack of self-regard. Thus, the meaning seems to be complimentary towards her, rather than derogatory or critical.[92]

Annemarie Schimmel explains this kind of reverse gendering: "One should not be misled by the constant use of the word 'man' in the mystical literature of the Islamic languages: it merely points to the ideal human being who has reached proximity to God where there is no distinction of sexes; and Rābiʿa is the prime model of this proximity."[93] This explanation, seeing the term "male" as asexual and merely as indicating proximity to God, denies the implications of power enshrined in this male image. I would prefer to suggest Umm ʿAlī's scholarly prowess might be explained only by making her "male."

In a later source, Jāmī's (d. 898/1492) *Nafaḥāt al-uns*, Umm ʿAlī is described differently. The *Nafahāt al-uns* post-dates the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* by three centuries and is the only one of the Sufi biographical compilations mentioned so far that has a section devoted to female Sufis, with more than thirty-three entries on women. Most of these are women from Basra and Kufa in the first centuries of Islam, with a handful of eastern women, notably a woman from Khwārazm, one from Nishapur, and one from Biṣṭām.[94] Jāmī actually does not connect Umm ʿAlī to Balkh specifically (or any other place). A large proportion of the women are identified through their marital or family relations to men, some of whose biographical dates we know. It is, yet again, through the men's lives that we can historicize these women. Umm ʿAlī's life story stands out, together with a handful of others in Jāmī's compilation, as having studied under great male scholars of the ninth and tenth centuries CE, and having achieved scholarly excellence and piety through charitable acts.[95] Jāmī states:

> Wa bā Aḥmad dar āncha būd muwāfiqat namūd. Bāyazīd-rā wa Abū Ḥafṣ-rā—qaddasa Allāh taʿālā ruḥ-huma—dīda būd wa az Bāyazīd suʾālāt karda būd. Abū Ḥafṣ gufta-ast ki: "Hamīsha ḥadīth-i zanān-rā makrūh mī-dāshtam, tā ān waqt ki Umm ʿAlī zawja-yi

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92) I thank Christopher Melchert, Harry Munt, and Adam Talib for helping me to parse and translate Abū Nuʿaym's account.

93) Schimmel, "Mystical Women": 151.

94) Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*: 613-34.

95) *Ibidem*: 613-34.

> Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh-rā dīdam" . . . Bāyazīd . . . gufta-ast: "Har-ki taṣṣawuf warzad bāyad bi-himmatī warzad chūn himmat-i Umm ʿAlī, zawja-yi Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh."[96]
>
> She agreed with Aḥmad b. Khidrawayh on everything. She met with Abū Yazīd and Abū Ḥafṣ[97]—may God bless their souls—and studied under Abū Yazīd. Abū Ḥafṣ has said, "I never valued women's *ḥadīth* until I met Umm ʿAlī, the wife of Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh" . . . Abū Yazīd . . . has said, "Whoever wants to study Sufism must do so with the degree of effort which Umm ʿAlī, the wife of Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh, had shown."

The notable difference from the earlier accounts is that the manly characterizations of Umm ʿAlī are missing, but Jāmī continues the tradition of her strengths as a scholar who enjoyed the company of some of the greatest male Muslim mystics of her time. It is interesting that Jāmī added the sentence emphasizing that Umm ʿAlī agreed with everything that Aḥmad believed in or did: it reads almost like an effort to correct the imbalance in the relationship in favour of Umm ʿAlī that we encounter in the earlier sources.

Conclusion

Umm ʿAlī of Balkh presents a very different case of female religious authority from that of Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya. The two had three things in common: their era—Rābiʿa preceded Umm ʿAlī by just one generation—their serious engagement with Muslim learning and mysticism as *ʿulamāt*, and their gender. Here is where the similarity ends. Each of these women had a particular path to scholarship, and each focussed on her own field of scholarship. While Rābiʿa came from the lowest stratum of society—she had been manumitted from slavery—Umm ʿAlī possessed exceptional wealth, not from her own labours but through inheritance from a family of the highest pedigree. Rābiʿa's disciples came from all walks of life, while Umm ʿAlī's social circle was centred on the provincial elite. Rābiʿa received many offers of marriage but rejected them all, choosing celibacy;[98] Umm ʿAlī had to ask Aḥmad b. Khiḍrawayh more than once before he sought her hand in marriage. Rābiʿa famously refused help from her friends, as a mark of her

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96) Jāmī, *Nafaḥāt al-uns*: 620-1.

97) The Nishapur mystic and blacksmith's son Abū Ḥafṣ al-Ḥaddād (d. 265/879).

98) Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*: 29.

extreme asceticism and otherworldliness,[99] while Umm ʿAlī donated stipends to the poor. Rābiʿa developed and taught concepts in Islamic mysticism focussed on love and communion with God, while Umm ʿAlī studied and taught the Qurʾan. We do not hear of Rābiʿa learning from any particular master,[100] while we read that Umm ʿAlī studied with her teacher Ṣāliḥ b. ʿAbdallāh, whose book of *tafsīr* she transmitted. Umm ʿAlī, like any good *ʿālim*, travelled to study for an extended period, while travel is not highlighted in the accounts of Rābiʿa.

In terms of the representations of these women, Rābiʿa tends to be accorded her own entries in the biographical dictionaries, while Umm ʿAlī is usually mentioned in relation to her husband. This seems to reflect a historiographical tradition rather than a real weighting of these two women's contributions to Islamic scholarship and mysticism. The author of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* was clearly impressed with the *mahd-i ʿaliyya*—the "[lady of] high standing"—concluding that it was no wonder that Balkh's *shuyūkh* were exceptional, considering how great their wives were.[101] This male author, rather predictably, saw accomplished women as a prerequisite for male eminence. It is reminiscent of the phrase, "Behind every successful man stands a great woman." Could it be that behind this successful woman stood a great man? Thus, al-Wāʾiẓ's praise should not detract from the fact that the author still did not feel compelled to devote a separate biography to her.

However, the Shaykh al-Islām and other mediaeval authors of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries CE give us clues as to how a woman like Umm ʿAlī used strategies that enabled them to manoeuvre in the world of scholarship. These included reverse genderization (i.e., "being a man") and engaging in nominal marriage. The stories of Umm ʿAlī that are repeated (with variations) in numerous sources during this period are the product of the historiographical tradition from which they spring. At some point between the mid-ninth and the early eleventh centuries, their stories became canonical in the biographical traditions and were introduced into the biographical sources and, in Umm ʿAlī's case, into the local history of Balkh.

We find a subtle change in the later sources on Umm ʿAlī's character: by the fifteenth century she loses those "manly" attributes that appear in the earlier sources. She becomes the virtuous woman who helps the poor and

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99) Smith, "Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya": 354; Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*: 99-100.

100) Smith, *Muslim Women Mystics*: 71.

101) *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 227.

follows her husband in everything he believes—no divorce, no nominal marriage with Abū Yazīd. There is no more unveiling, no challenging or teaching her husband. Umm ʿAlī becomes pacified by historiography. Umm ʿAlī, like other women scholars in the later sources, are still represented as excelling in their scholarship and mystical experience, but social conventions eventually obliged the male authors who memorialized them to turn their legacy quiet, though not completely silent, for which we should be thankful.

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Appendix

The following excerpt on the ninth-century Balkhī scholar Umm ʿAlī is taken from the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh,* written in Persian in 676/1278 and based on an Arabic original of 610/1214 that does not survive.[102] The Persian text has been translated and transcribed, with a commentary.

> Shaykh al-Islām Abū al-Qāsim Qushayrī, may God have mercy on him, related that, one day, an esteemed visitor arrived at Shaykh Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh[ʾs house]. The *shaykh* said to his wife, "I want to invite this friend in because he is the head *(sayyid)* of the generous and the free of all times." The lady *(khātūn)* said, "Oh Aḥmad! Can't you do that, and don't you know how one ought to invite these people of humanity and [fol. 135b][103] chivalry *(murūwat wa-futuwwat)?"* The *shaykh* said, "It cannot be, but that a meal must be prepared?" The lady explained that, "according [to practice, you must] slaughter sheep, cows, and asses and leave [their remains] at the entrance to our house." The *shaykh* asked, "I understand the sacrifice of the cows, but what is the need for the asses?' The mistress of the house *(kad-bānū)* retorted, "If one brings an honoured guest to the house, does it matter that the alley dogs get some food thanks to that?"
>
> And in the history books it has come down to us that: The *mahd-i ʿaliyya* ("[lady of] high standing")[104] who was the wife of Shaykh Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh, was the daughter of Mālik b. Ṣāliḥ, and her mother was known as Muʾmina (lit. "believer [fem.]"). [Her mother] was the daughter of Ḥasan [b.] [Ḥ]umrān, who was the governor *(wālī)* of Khorasan.[105] The grave *(turbat)* of the lady Muʾmina[106] is in a place in Ba[l]kh[107] called

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102) This reading is based on the two oldest manuscripts of *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*: the Paris ("Persan 115") and Pakistan manuscripts ("PK"). It stems from an ongoing revision of Ḥabībī's edition carried out by Ali Mir Ansari, Arezou Azad, and Edmund Herzig, as part of the "Balkh Art and Cultural Heritage" project funded by the Leverhulme Trust. ʿAbd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī's edition of the excerpt (which does not include the Pakistan manuscript but does include the two late St Petersburg manuscripts) can be found in *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 226-7. For further details on the manuscripts and the text, please refer above.

103) Folio numbers relate to the folios of MS Persan 115 of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* kept in Paris.

104) *Mahd,* as in "level," "position," and "cradle," and *ʿaliyya* as in "high." Steingass, *Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*: 1353, 865. *Mahdī* ("future prophet") is given incorrectly (instead of *mahd*) by Gramlich, in *Alte Vorbilder*, 2: 99.

105) The copyist's rendering here of the name as "Ḥasan ʿImrān" is erroneous. "Ḥasan b. Ḥumrān" is rendered correctly elsewhere in the manuscript. See *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*, ed. Ḥabībī: 124-5.

106) Given the ambiguity that comes with the phrase, "the lady *muʾmina,*" in which *muʾmina* ("pious") could be used in a simple adjectival phrase denoting "the pious lady," there is a slight possibility that the author is referring here to Umm ʿAlī, but it seems more likely that he means her mother, called Muʾmina.

107) The *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh*'s editor Ḥabībī read "Banj" here, not "Bakh," and suggested that it was a place near Samarqand that is mentioned by Yāqūt in the *Kitab buldān* (Beirut: 1955), 1:498. A *ṭāq-i Muʾmina* is not mentioned in the Qandiyya. See *Qandiyya dar bayān-i*

the Arch of Muʾmina *(ṭāq-i Muʾmina)* and it is in [aʔ] *ribāṭ*.[108] The lady of Shaykh Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh, may God have mercy on him, has transmitted the book of *Tafsīr* by Ṣāliḥ [b.] ʿAbdallāḥ. They say that she sold her own land and property for 79,000 dirhams and embarked on the *ḥajj*. When she arrived in Mecca, she performed the *ḥajj* of [fol. 136a] Islam, and completed all its rites. Then she turned to the study of Islamic learning *(ʿilm)*. She resided [in Mecca] for seven years, becoming skilled in all the subjects of *ʿilm*, and attended the sessions of *ḥadīth (aḥādīth istimāʿ kard)*. After that, she returned to Balkh, and in Balkh she was buried near the tomb of Shaykh Aḥmad.

ʿAlī b. Faḍl, may God have mercy on him, relates about Shaykh Aḥmad Khiḍrawayh, may God have mercy on him, that, Umm ʿAlī, the elder wife would say [in Arabic], "The faith of a believer is like a mountain: it is safe from the movements of the wind." And [Shaykh Aḥmad] had another wife, Ḥakīma Zāḥida, and she said, "The faith of a believer is like a supple tree that flexes [in the wind] but does not fall." The meaning *(maʿnī)* [of the Arabic] is that the faith of a believer is like a mountain that is immune to the blowing and quivering of the wind. The younger wife [on the other hand] contended that the faith of a believer was like a young tree, which leans in all directions but does not fall.

One day they brought the news to Umm ʿAlī that Shaykh Aḥmad had passed away. Both ladies were in the kitchen, baking bread. The younger wife rushed to the door to obtain more details, leaving off her [fol. 136b] bread-baking duties. After just a short while, the happy news arrived that the *shaykh* was alive, having [merely] fainted and [now] regained consciousness. For a second time the younger wife had run to the door to find out everything about his recovery. [During all this time,] Umm ʿAlī, who had spoken about the faith of the believer as a mountain, had remained still and seated, never stopping baking bread. She had not been upset and aggrieved by the news of the *shaykh*'s death, nor had she been overjoyed and elated by the [subsequent] notification that he was in good health. In that moment, the wife Ḥakīma Zāhida, who had said that the faith of a believer was like a young tree that leaned in all directions but did not fall over, had understood the words of Umm ʿAlī. Thus, it is clear now that each of us has his own station *(maqām)* and time *(waqt)*. If the wives of these pure [ones] were such, [just think] at what levels the great *shuyūkh* must have been!

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mazārāt-i Samarqand (Qandiyya on the Tombs of Samarqand), ed. Īraj Afshār (Tehran: Kitābkhāna-yi Ṭāhūrī, 1955).

108) The term "*ribāṭ*" here may be the term used to denote Sufi refuges and/or military outposts. The author of the *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh* uses the term in these senses in other parts of the book. See, for example, *Faḍāʾil-i Balkh,* ed. Ḥabībī: 215; also Jacqueline Chabbi, "Remarques sur le développement historique des mouvements ascétiques au Khurāsān," *Studia Islamica* 46 (1977): 35, and Chabbi, "Ribāṭ (A.), a Military-religious Institution of Mediaeval Islam. 1. History and Development of the Institution", *EI*^{2}, 8: 493-506. "Ribāṭ" appears also as a well-known toponym of a place between Bukhara and Samarqand, which could change the reading here somewhat, but seems less likely. One of the manuscripts of the *Taʾrīkh-i Bukhāra* refers to the Ribāt-i Malik that stands in a desert. Narshakhī, *Taʾrīkh-i Bukhāra*, trans. Richard Frye (Cambridge, MA: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1954): 13.